

Religious Homogamy, Race/Ethnicity, and Parents' Relationship Stability

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Many studies have explored the link between religious homogamy and marital stability, but little is known about the role of religious homogamy within cohabiting unions. Using data on 2,019 couples from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this study examined the influence of religious homogamy on the stability of marital and cohabiting relationships among parents as well as whether race/ethnicity moderated this relationship. Life table estimates suggest that denominational homogamy and attendance homogamy were unrelated to marital stability, but denominational homogamy was positively associated with the stability of cohabiting unions. Results also suggest that frequent attendance at religious services by both partners was more likely to contribute to relationship stability among Hispanic cohabiters than cohabiters from other racial/ethnic groups. Overall, this study suggests that the relationship between religious homogamy and relationship stability may vary by race/ethnicity and union type.

*Keywords: cohabitation; Fragile Families; marriage; religiosity; race; relationship stability*

Families in the U.S. have become increasingly diverse. Most individuals cohabit at least once, and most marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Cherlin 2010; Manning 2013). There have also been increases in single-parent families and stepfamilies (Cherlin 2010; Payne 2013). In addition to structural changes, romantic relationships have also become more diverse with increasing numbers of interracial and interfaith couples (Lofquist et al. 2012; Riley 2013). These trends are also linked, with cohabiting couples being more likely to be racially and religiously heterogamous than married couples (Lofquist et al. 2012).

Scholars have devoted significant attention to understanding these trends in family diversity, but there is still much to learn. Specifically, little is known about how these trends may be linked to one another and what the consequences of these connections may be, especially for children raised in families that have an increased likelihood of dissolving. For example, cohabiting relationships are more unstable than marriages (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Smock 2000), but it is unclear whether the increased likelihood of religious heterogamy among cohabiters contributes to this instability. Moreover, diverse family forms are especially common among racial/ethnic minorities; Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to have a child within a cohabiting union than marriage, and also may be more likely to experience negative consequences associated with higher rates of instability among cohabiting unions because these groups are more financially and socially disadvantaged (Landale and Oropesa 2007; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006). Thus, it is important to explore factors that may contribute to the stability of cohabiting relationships and whether the influence of these factors varies by race/ethnicity.

Religion is one important factor that may contribute to the stability of cohabiting relationships. Research suggests that shared religious beliefs and practices increase marital stability whereas religious differences are associated with increased conflict and a greater

likelihood of divorce (Call and Heaton 1997; Curtis and Ellison 2002; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993). However, little is known about whether religious homogamy may also contribute to the stability of cohabiting relationships. Recent studies have begun to explore the role of religion among unmarried couples (e.g., Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008), but have yet to examine the influence of shared religious beliefs specifically or whether the influence of religion on relationship stability varies by race/ethnicity. Because both African-Americans and Hispanics have higher rates of religiosity than Whites (Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo 1998; Taylor, Chatters, and Levin 2004), it is also important to explore whether any influence of religious homogamy on relationship stability is more pronounced for African-Americans and Hispanics.

Using five years of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW), this study examines two research questions. First, does the positive association between religious homogamy and relationship stability also hold true for cohabiting relationships? Second, do the relationships between religious homogamy, union type, and relationship stability differ by race/ethnicity? Overall, by focusing on a sample of parents who are at risk for family instability and financial hardship, this study aims to explore whether and under what conditions shared religious beliefs and practices may strengthen (or weaken) relationships within a population that is characterized by high rates of instability (Osborne and McLanahan 2007). This knowledge will be beneficial in understanding how variations in family structures and dynamics may influence parental relationship stability (which ultimately has consequences for children as well).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Religious Homogamy and Relationship Stability*

Research suggests that homogamy is associated with increased relationship stability for two reasons. First, homogamy increases the likelihood that couples have similar values and

communication styles, which allows them to understand each other and engage in shared activities together (Kalmijn 1998). Second, homogamous couples are able to avoid stigma, discrimination, lack of support or other challenges that come from crossing social boundaries (Kalmijn, de Graaf, and Janssen 2005). These arguments have been used to understand homogamy on a variety of social characteristics including race, social class, and education.

These arguments can also help explain the influence of religious homogamy on marital stability. First, shared religious beliefs may lead to stronger bonds and shared values between religiously homogamous partners (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Mahoney et al. 2003). In contrast, religious differences may result in divergent worldviews and values about things such as housework and raising children, creating conflict (Curtis and Ellison 2002; Petts and Knoester 2007). Second, couples who share religious beliefs may receive social support from a religious community (Call and Heaton 1997; Edgell 2006). Parents can rely on this community for parenting guidance and other resources, which may be especially helpful to “fragile” families who have limited access to other sources of support (Edgell 2006; Lichter and Carmalt 2009; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). By attending religious services together, couples are also exposed to teachings on relationship skills (e.g., compassion, forgiveness) that may increase relationship stability (Edgell 2006; Lambert and Dollahite 2006). In contrast, religiously heterogamous couples may not have access to the same social support network as religiously homogamous couples and may not be fully integrated into religious institutions due to the crossing of social boundaries (Kalmijn et al. 2005). The lack of social support may be especially influential in increasing the risk of divorce among religiously heterogamous couples (Kalmijn et al. 2005).

In addition to these two general explanations for the influence of homogamy, there are also factors unique to religion that might contribute to marital stability. Research links religious

beliefs and practices to marital quality, happiness, and stability (Call and Heaton 1997; Ortega, Whitt, and Williams, Jr. 1988). Religion may also lead parents to sanctify family relationships (i.e., view these relationships as having spiritual character and significance), which may decrease the risk of dissolution (Mahoney et al. 2003). As a result, shared religious beliefs and practices may further help to strengthen marital stability among homogamous couples. Indeed, religious homogamy is associated with a lower risk of divorce (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Lichter and Carmalt 2009; Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers 2009). Consistent with this research, I expect that:

*H1: Religiously homogamous marriages will be less likely to dissolve than religiously heterogamous marriages.*

#### *Religion, Cohabitation, and Relationship Stability*

Given the increasingly high rates of cohabitation in the U.S. (especially among low-income populations), it is important to consider whether and how religion may influence these relationships. Most people cohabit at least once in their lives (60% of women ever cohabited in 2010) and the majority of marriages are preceded by cohabitation (Cherlin 2010; Manning 2013). Although cohabiting unions are often characterized as having high rates of instability (Bumpass and Lu 2000), it is important to understand factors that may improve cohabiting relationships especially because many of these families also involve children. One such factor is religion.

Similar to the relationship between religious homogamy and marital stability, shared religious beliefs and practices may also provide benefits to cohabiting couples. First, cohabiting partners who share religious beliefs may feel more connected to one another and share a similar worldview that helps them to avoid parenting conflict (Call and Heaton 1997; Curtis and Ellison 2002). Second, religious homogamy may increase the likelihood that cohabiting couples are exposed to family-oriented social networks within religious communities that provide social

support (Edgell 2006; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). Although these networks often promote marriage as the ideal family form, they may also provide support to parents in communities where marriage rates are low and cohabitation is common (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007; 2008). Religious homogamy may also lead cohabiting parents to sanctify their family relationships, and increase the likelihood that they are exposed to messages about following a code of decency (Anderson 1999; Mahoney et al. 2003; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2008). As a result, religiously homogamous cohabiting partners may be more likely to stay together and avoid issues such as multiple partnering that limits relationship stability within urban areas (Edin and Nelson 2013).

Despite the possibility that religion provides benefits to cohabiting couples, many religious institutions emphasize marriage as the ideal family form, and view living together prior to marriage as sinful (Edgell 2006; Franklin 2004; Sullivan 2012). As a result, some cohabiters may feel stigmatized within religious communities (Edgell 2006; Sullivan 2012). However, it is possible that this stigma is self-appraised (Pinhey and Perez 2000). Despite teachings on marriage, many urban churches are silent on issues of sexual fidelity and cohabitation and instead try to foster healthy relationships regardless of their structure (Edgell 2006; Franklin 2004; Sullivan 2012). Such support is especially extended to parents, as urban churches attempt to provide low-income parents with resources that may assist in raising children (Sullivan 2012). Because urban (i.e., inner-city) churches express a desire to include and support unmarried parents, it is likely that any benefits associated with religion will extend to cohabiting couples. Indeed, evidence suggests that the positive association between religion and relationship quality is not limited to married couples (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2008). Thus, I expect that:

*H2: Religiously homogamous cohabiting couples will be less likely to dissolve than religiously heterogamous cohabiting couples.*

*Religion, Race/Ethnicity, and Union Status*

Patterns of religiosity and union formation also differ by race/ethnicity, but few studies have explored these relationships (Ellison, Burdette, and Wilcox 2010). Religion has historically been central to the Black community, serving as the primary social institution for Blacks (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Taylor et al. 2004). As such, some have labeled the Black church a ‘semi-involuntary’ institution, as religious institutions have provided authority in social and political affairs and helped to maintain social solidarity among Blacks (Lincoln and Mamiya; Taylor et al. 2004). Not surprisingly, religious involvement is high among Blacks, and Blacks are more likely to attend religious services and engage in private religious practices than Whites (Taylor et al. 2004; Taylor, Chatters, and Brown 2014).

The primary message about family professed by Black churches is a traditional one, emphasizing the importance of the nuclear (married) family (Franklin 2004; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). Despite this message and high rates of religiosity, nontraditional families are common among Blacks. Specifically, Blacks have low rates of marriage, creating a trend known as the African American marriage-religion paradox (Ellison et al. 2010; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). Instead, Blacks are more likely than Whites to form a union by cohabiting instead of marrying, are more likely to have a child out of wedlock, and are more likely to remain in a cohabiting relationship (as opposed to getting married) after having a child (Landale and Oropesa 2007; Manning 2001; Manning and Landale 1996; Smock 2000). There is also evidence suggesting that Blacks perceive cohabitation differently than Whites; whereas Whites often view cohabitation as a step towards marriage, Blacks are more likely to view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (Manning and Landale 1996). High incarceration rates among Blacks and limited economic opportunities reduce the pool of marriageable men for Blacks (Harknett and



McLanahan 2004). Moreover, marriage is often viewed as an institution that requires economic stability, leaving Blacks more likely to substitute cohabitation for marriage until their financial situation improves (Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). Indeed, there are smaller differences in economic resources, social support, and relationship quality between cohabiting and marital relationships among Blacks than Whites (Manning 2001; Osborne, Manning, and Smock 2007).

The prevalence of cohabitation among Blacks have led many Black churches to avoid focusing on issues such as cohabitation (Franklin 2004; Sullivan 2012; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). Instead, Black church leaders argue that the focus should be on promoting healthy relationships (not just marriage) and providing relationship support to couples (Franklin 2004; Sullivan 2012). This acceptance (or at least non-rejection) of cohabiting couples may provide benefits to religious Blacks and help to strengthen Black families (Hill 1972; Taylor et al. 2004). Indeed, evidence suggests that religiosity helps to reduce the gap in relationship stability between Black and White couples (Ellison et al. 2010). Thus, religious homogamy may be more likely to promote relationship stability among Black cohabiters than White cohabiters.

Similar to Blacks, Hispanics have high rates of religiosity (Diaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo 1998). The vast majority of Hispanics identify as Catholic, although an increasing number of Hispanics identify with evangelical Protestant denominations (Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda 2003). Religion is also a key part of ethnic identity, and most Hispanics are part of a Hispanic-oriented religious community (e.g., most members are Hispanic and services are offered in Spanish) (Pew Hispanic Center 2007).

Also similar to Blacks, Hispanic churches promote traditional families, emphasizing marriage as a sacred relationship and viewing nonmarital sex as sinful (although evangelical Protestant Latinos are more likely to view nonmarital sex as sinful than Catholic Latinos)

(Ellison, Wolfinger, and Ramos-Wada 2013; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007; Wolfinger, Wilcox, and Hernandez 2010). However, in contrast to Blacks, Hispanics generally have high aspirations about marriage, believe in lifelong marriage, and are more likely to marry than other disadvantaged groups (this is especially true for Mexican-Americans) (Baca Zinn and Pok 2002; Ellison et al. 2013; Oropesa and Landale 2004; Landale and Oropesa 2007).

Despite the emphasis on marriage, there is a cultural tradition of consensual unions among Hispanics. These unions are similar to cohabiting unions in the U.S., and have acted as a substitute for formal marriage among low-income populations within Latin America (Landale and Oropesa 2007). Perhaps not surprisingly, U.S. Hispanics are more accepting of informal relationships and more likely to view cohabitation as an alternative to marriage than Whites (Manning and Landale 1996; Wildsmith and Raley 2006; Wolfinger et al. 2010). This is especially true among Puerto Rican cohabiters, who (similar to Blacks) are more similar to married couples than Whites (Landale and Oropesa 2007). Moreover, Hispanics are more likely to have children within cohabiting relationships and accept cohabitation as a legitimate family structure in which to raise a child than other racial/ethnic groups (Landale and Oropesa 2007; Manning 2001; Wildsmith and Raley 2006).

Overall, the tradition of familism – having a strong orientation and obligation to one’s family – is prevalent among Hispanics (Baca Zinn and Pok 2002). Although marriage is a highly valued family structure among Hispanics, cohabitation is also accepted (Ellison et al. 2013). As such, the family-oriented networks of social support that exist in religious institutions may be especially beneficial to Hispanic cohabiters (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). These religious networks may embrace the ideals of familism and provide support and other resources to cohabiting parents that help to strengthen these families. Indeed, evidence suggests that

religiosity helps to reduce the gap in relationship stability between Hispanic and White couples (Ellison et al. 2010). Thus, I expect that:

*H3: Religious homogamy will be more likely to increase the stability of cohabiting relationships for Black and Hispanic couples than White couples.*

#### *Other Factors*

A number of other factors may also influence the relationship between religious homogamy and relationship stability. Age and SES are associated with relationship stability (older, higher SES individuals are more likely to be married and are more likely to have stable relationships), and these factors may also influence religious participation (Lichter et al. 2006; Smock et al. 2005; Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Having a greater number of children may also increase the risk of financial disadvantage and stress, but may also increase religious behavior among parents (Stolzenberg et al. 1995). There is also evidence suggesting that conceiving and giving birth to children may increase marital stability, but have less of an influence on the stability of cohabiting relationships (Manning 2004). Moreover, newer relationships are more likely to dissolve than established relationships, and growing up in a nontraditional family may increase the risk of relationship instability (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Smock 2000). There is also evidence linking childhood family structure and religious behavior, but there is a lack of consensus on whether being raised in a nontraditional family is associated with lower religiosity (e.g., Lau and Wolfinger 2011; Petts 2014). Finally, foreign-born Hispanics have a lower likelihood of relationship dissolution than native-born Hispanics (Phillips and Sweeney 2005).

#### DATA AND METHODS

### *Sample*

Data from four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) were used in this study. This is a longitudinal, birth cohort study that follows 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000 and their parents. Parents were interviewed at the hospital shortly after the child's birth (W1) and then again for follow-up interviews approximately one (W2), three (W3), and five years later (W4). The FFCW is an urban study that is representative of all nonmarital births in cities with populations over 200,000. There are also a sizeable number of married parents in the data, allowing for a comparison of married and cohabiting unions (see Reichman et al. 2001 for details on study design). These data are well-suited for this study because (a) information from both partners was collected, allowing for an examination of religious homogamy, (b) the data includes an oversample of nonmarital births, which include a high proportion of cohabiting families, and (c) four waves of data allow for a longitudinal examination of whether religious homogamy is associated with relationship stability.

Of the 4,898 families in the data, there were 3,830 families in which both mothers and fathers were interviewed at W1. 1,208 couples were excluded from this sample because the parents were not married or living together at the time of their child's birth. An additional 44 couples were excluded due to missing data on religious affiliation, and 101 cases were deleted due to inconsistencies in dates reported by the mother (e.g., the date of union separation occurred prior to the baseline interview). Finally, 174 cases in which either parent reported a race other than White, Black, or Hispanic were excluded, along with 254 racially heterogamous couples. These exclusions result in a final sample of 2,019 couples who were either married (N = 814) or cohabiting (N = 1,205) at the time of their child's birth.

### *Dependent Variable*

Relationship dissolution was the dependent variable for this study. A relationship was treated as dissolved if the couple was no longer married or residing together in the same household. Couples were at risk for dissolution starting at the birth of their child (i.e., the date of the baseline interview) until either the relationship ended or the couple was censored.

Relationship dissolution was treated as a discrete event, and couples were right-censored if they dropped out of the survey or were still married or cohabiting at W4. Cohabiting couples who transitioned into marriage were also right-censored ( $n = 327$ ; 16% of cohabiters). Relationship dissolution was measured by the month and year in which the relationship ended, as reported by the mother. When mothers reported a separation but did not provide a separation date, they were coded as separating in January of the year in which they were interviewed.

#### *Independent Variables*

*Religious Homogamy.* Denominational affiliation and religious participation were used to construct indicators of religious homogamy. First, religious denominations were categorized using the classification scheme created by Steensland et al. (2000) as a guide (one variation being that Black Protestants and evangelical Protestants were combined in the same category). Couples in which both partners were classified in the same denominational category at W1 were considered denominationally homogamous, and couples in which each partner was classified in a different category at W1 were considered denominationally heterogamous. An additional variable was included to indicate couples who transitioned from being denominationally heterogamous to denominationally homogamous between W1 and W3 (the only two waves in which religious affiliation was asked). Life table estimates of relationship dissolution based on the denominational category of both partners can be found in the Appendix. These results show some denominational variations, but overall rates of dissolution are similar within religiously

homogamous and heterogamous categories.<sup>1</sup> Given these similarities and small sample sizes for some of these relationship types, a dichotomous measure of religious homogamy was used here.

Second, similar patterns of religious participation were used as indicators of religious homogamy. Mothers' and fathers' religious participation were measured at each wave (responses range from 0 = *never* to 4 = *once a week or more*). These measures were used to create three dichotomous time-varying variables: *Both Frequent Attenders* indicates couples in which both partners attended religious services at least several times a month<sup>2</sup>, *Both Infrequent Attenders* indicates couples in which both partners never or rarely attended religious services (indicated as a few times a year or less), and *Attendance Heterogamy* (used as the reference group) indicates couples in which one partner attended frequently and one partner attended infrequently.

*Union Type.* Union type was taken from mothers' reports at the baseline interview of whether she was married to or residing with the biological father of her new child.

*Race/Ethnicity.* A series of dummy variables was used to indicate the racial/ethnic composition of the relationship: (a) both parents are White (reference group), (b) both parents are Black, and (c) both parents are Hispanic.

#### *Control Variables*

Relationship duration indicates the number of years the couple had been married or cohabiting prior to the observed period. Mothers' and fathers' age were taken from W1 and

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<sup>1</sup> The exception is that Catholic homogamous relationships have a lower risk of dissolution than conservative Protestant homogamous relationships ( $p < .05$ ). Also, a small number of the heterogamous relationships have significantly different risks of dissolution, but only one of these differences were significant in Cox models using these categories (conservative Protestant – mainline Protestant cohabiting relationships had a higher risk of dissolution). Moreover, small sample sizes for some categories prevent an exploration of whether race/ethnicity moderates the relationships between religious homogamy and relationship stability (H3).

<sup>2</sup> Supplemental models using weekly attendance as the indicator of frequent attendance produced results that are consistent with those presented here. This indicator is not used to maintain larger cell sizes and model parsimony, as an additional category would be needed to distinguish between partners who attend several times a month and those who attend services rarely or never. Similar measures have been used in other studies (Lichter and Carmalt 2009).

measured in years. Two dummy variables indicate whether the mother and the father lived with both of their parents at the age of 15. A time-varying variable was included to indicate the number of kids (in addition to the focal child) that the mother had at each wave. A dummy variable was also included to indicate whether either partner had been married prior to the beginning of this study. Separate dummy variables were also used to indicate whether the mother and father were born in the U.S. A set of dummy variables was used to indicate the educational attainment of the couple (treated as time-varying variables): (a) both parents did not complete high school (reference category), (b) both parents completed high school, (c) both parents completed some college, (d) both parents were college graduates, and (e) parents have completed different levels of education. Household income, ranging from 1 (under \$5,000) to 9 (greater than \$75,000), was treated as a time-varying variable. A time-varying dummy variable was also included to indicate whether the mother received welfare benefits or food stamps in the past year.

#### *Analytic Strategy*

Life-table estimates and Cox proportional hazards models were used in this study. Life-tables allow for a description of the cumulative proportion of married and cohabiting couples who had ended their relationship by the fifth year after their child's birth. Life-table estimates were obtained for both married and cohabiting couples by type of religious homogamy to examine the overall rates of dissolution within each category. Chi-square tests were then used to analyze whether overall rates of relationship dissolution were significantly different based on union type and religious composition.

To further test the hypotheses, Cox proportional hazards models with robust standard errors were used. Analyses were conducted to test the proportional hazards (PH) assumption needed for Cox models to work appropriately. Formal tests (using Schoenfeld residuals)

suggested that two variables (union type and race) violated this assumption. Given that the likelihood of relationship dissolution (and hazard functions) are different for married and cohabiting couples, separate Cox models by union type were used in the analysis.

To test H1 and H2, a baseline Cox model was used to examine whether religious homogamy was associated with relationship dissolution for married and cohabiting couples in separate models. To test H3, interaction terms for *religious homogamy x race/ethnicity* were included to test whether relationships between religious homogamy and relationship stability are moderated by race/ethnicity. To account for missing values and retain a larger sample, regression-based techniques were used to impute missing data. Supplementary analyses using only baseline values and listwise deletion produced similar results as those presented here.

## RESULTS

Summary statistics are presented in Table 1. Consistent with previous research, approximately half (54%) of cohabiting couples identified with the same religious denomination, whereas over two-thirds of married couples (70%) were denominationally homogamous. Also, cohabiting couples were less likely than married couples to consist of two partners that attend religious services frequently. Results in Table 1 also show that cohabitation was more common among Black and Hispanic couples than White couples.

----- Insert Table 1 about here -----

Life-table estimates are presented in Table 2. These results show the cumulative proportion of unions that have dissolved by W4. By the end of the observed period, over one-third of cohabiting unions dissolved compared to only 12% of marriages. Somewhat surprisingly, results in Table 2 do not provide any support for H1. There was no difference in the rate of dissolution between marriages that are denominationally homogamous and those that are



denominationally heterogamous. Moreover, although the percentage of marriages that dissolved involving heterogamous attenders (15%) was slightly higher than the rate of dissolution among homogamous attenders (12%), these differences were not statistically significant. Thus, in contrast to H1, religious homogamy seems to be unrelated to marital stability in this sample.

----- Insert Table 2 about here -----

Results in Table 2 provide some evidence in support of H2. Although attendance homogamy was not significantly related to relationship stability among cohabiting couples, denominationally heterogamous cohabiting couples (41%) were more likely to dissolve than denominationally homogamous cohabiting couples (33%). Thus, in support of H2, shared religious beliefs appear to contribute to relationship stability among cohabiting couples.

----- Insert Table 3 about here -----

Table 3 presents results from Cox models that further assess the relationships between religious homogamy and relationship stability among married couples. Results are presented as hazard ratios, which describe how a one-unit change in a variable influences the relative risk of dissolution; hazard ratios greater than one indicate an increased risk of dissolution, whereas hazard ratios less than one indicate a decreased risk of dissolution. Consistent with results in Table 2, results in Models 1 and 2 suggest that religious homogamy is unrelated to marital stability.<sup>3</sup>

Interaction terms were included in Models 3 and 4 to test H3 and examine whether race/ethnicity moderates the relationship between religious homogamy and marital stability. None of the interaction terms are significant, suggesting that H3 is not supported for married

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<sup>3</sup> Results were unchanged when each partner's denominational affiliation are included as control variables.

couples. Overall, results in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that religious homogamy is unrelated to marital stability and this is consistent for all racial/ethnic groups.

----- Insert Table 4 about here -----

Table 4 presents results from Cox models that further assess the relationships between religious homogamy and relationship stability among cohabiting couples. Consistent with the results in Table 2, results in Model 1 show that denominationally homogamous cohabiters were 22% less likely to dissolve their relationship than denominationally heterogamous cohabiting couples. Moreover, relationships in which both partners attend religious services infrequently were 36% more likely to dissolve than relationships with at least one frequently attending partner. However, once control variables were included in Model 2, the religious composition of the relationship was no longer significantly related to relationship dissolution among cohabiters.

Interaction terms were included in Models 3 and 4 to test H3 and examine whether race/ethnicity moderates the relationship between religious homogamy and relationship stability among cohabiters. Results provide partial support for H3; although there was no evidence to suggest that race/ethnicity moderated the relationships between denominational homogamy and relationship stability (Model 3), results in Model 4 suggest that these relationships may be unique among Black and Hispanic cohabiters. Specifically, attendance homogamy was more likely to reduce the likelihood of relationship dissolution for Black cohabiters than White cohabiters. Moreover, Hispanic cohabiters who had the same pattern of religious attendance were less likely to dissolve their relationship than other religiously homogamous cohabiting couples.

----- Insert Figure 1 about here -----

This result is further illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts predicted hazard ratios (from results in Model 4 of Tables 3 and 4) showing the likelihood of dissolving a relationship relative

to religiously heterogamous White couples. As shown in the first panel of Figure 1, Black married couples had a higher risk of dissolution than White and Hispanic married couples. However, there is no significant difference in the risk of dissolution based on the religious composition of the marital union.

Results in the second panel of Figure 1 show that the influence of religious homogamy on the risk of dissolution among cohabiting couples did vary by race/ethnicity. Among Whites, religiously homogamous cohabiters were over three (both infrequent attenders) and five times (both frequent attenders) as likely to dissolve their relationship as religiously heterogamous cohabiters. In contrast, among Blacks, religiously homogamous cohabiters were only slightly more likely to dissolve their relationship than religiously heterogamous cohabiters. However, Black religiously homogamous cohabiters were over three times more likely to dissolve their relationship as White religiously heterogamous cohabiters, but less likely to dissolve their relationship than White religiously homogamous cohabiters. Among Hispanics, frequently attending Hispanic cohabiters were only 77% more likely to dissolve their relationship than White religiously heterogamous cohabiters. Moreover, the pattern of dissolution risk also varied by race/ethnicity. For White and Black cohabiters, frequent attenders had the highest risk of dissolution, followed by infrequent attenders and heterogamous attenders. In contrast, among Hispanic cohabiters, frequent attenders had the lowest risk of dissolving their relationship.

----- Insert Table 5 about here -----

Results from life table estimates provide additional support for the unique influence of attendance homogamy among Hispanic cohabiters. As shown in Table 5, there was not a significant difference in the rate of dissolution by attendance homogamy/heterogamy among Whites and Blacks. However, Hispanic cohabiters who attended religious services frequently

were significantly less likely to dissolve their relationship than other Hispanic cohabiting couples (the difference between frequent and infrequent attenders just fell short of statistical significance at  $p < .054$ ). Furthermore, the rate of dissolution among Hispanic cohabiting unions in which both partners attended religious services frequently was lower than the rate of dissolution for all other cohabiting couples (regardless of race/ethnicity or religious attendance), and not significantly different from the rate of dissolution among Hispanic marriages. Thus, religious homogamy appears to be especially beneficial for Hispanic cohabiters; the additional support that Hispanic cohabiting couples may receive by frequently attending religious services may help to reinforce cultural traditions of familism and increase relationship stability.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to extend our knowledge on family diversity by focusing on whether religious homogamy contributes to relationship stability across diverse family forms. A sample of parents from low-income urban areas (where nonmarital families are especially common) was used to examine this question. A number of interesting findings emerged.

In contrast to previous research, the first hypothesis was not supported; religious homogamy was unrelated to marital stability. There were slightly fewer religiously homogamous marriages that dissolved than religiously heterogamous marriages (by religious attendance), but these differences were not statistically significant. In addition, results from Cox models (Table 3) suggest that the lower likelihood of relationship dissolution for frequently attending married couples compared to religiously heterogamous couples was only trending towards significance ( $p < .06$ ). This may be partially due to sample size, as only 12% of married couples ended their relationship. A larger sample might have increased the statistical power of these analyses.

The low rate of dissolution among married couples is especially surprising given the sample of fragile families used in this study. Thus, it is likely that this is a selective group of married parents. Married couples in this sample had been together for over four years on average and have higher levels of SES than cohabiting couples. Thus, these couples may have access to other institutions that provide them with social support regardless of their religious background. Moreover, married couples may have already figured out how to deal with any religious dissimilarities prior to marriage. Thus, the selectivity of this married sample may limit the influence of religion on relationship stability. Future research should further examine variations in the influence of religious homogamy on relationship stability by SES.

One primary goal of this study was to examine whether religious homogamy contributed to relationship stability among cohabiting parents, and results provided some evidence that denominational homogamy was associated with a lower risk of relationship dissolution among cohabiters (supporting H2). Consistent with previous research on married couples (both with and without children), cohabiting couples who share religious beliefs seem to receive some benefits that increase the stability of their relationship (relative to religiously heterogamous cohabiters). Shared religious beliefs may result in greater emotional and spiritual support for one another, fewer arguments, and agreements on how to raise their children, all of which may help to strengthen bonds between cohabiting parents who may lack access to other sources of social capital (Edgell 2006; Lichter and Carmalt 2009; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007).

However, the benefits of religious homogamy for cohabiters appear to be restricted to denominational homogamy. Life-table estimates suggested that attendance homogamy did not have a significant influence on relationship stability among cohabiters. Moreover, attendance homogamy was unrelated to relationship stability once control variables were introduced. This

suggests that while cohabiters may benefit from sharing beliefs with their partner, they may not receive any resources that contribute to relationship stability by attending religious services together. This may be due to cohabiters feeling stigmatized when attending religious services, even if this stigma is self-appraised and not directly assessed by members of the religious community (Edgell 2006; Pinhey and Perez 2000; Sullivan 2012). Thus, private religious beliefs may be more beneficial in maintaining relationship stability among cohabiters than public religious practices, but additional research is needed to further explore this issue.

The final contribution of this study was to explore whether race/ethnicity conditioned the relationships between religious homogamy, union type, and relationship stability. It was expected that religious homogamy would be a stronger predictor of relationship stability among Black and Hispanic cohabiters because religion is more important, and cohabitation is more accepted, within Black and Hispanic communities than among Whites. Results from this study provided some evidence supporting this hypothesis, showing that frequent attendance at religious services by both partners is more likely to contribute to relationship stability among Hispanic cohabiters than cohabiters from other racial/ethnic groups. Previous research suggests that higher levels of religiosity among Hispanics may contribute to relationship quality (Ellison et al. 2010), and this study extends this research to suggest that shared, frequent religious participation may also contribute to relationship stability among Hispanic cohabiters.

The belief among Hispanics that cohabitation is a legitimate family form in which to raise children may create a context in which cohabitation among parents is not stigmatized by religious institutions (Manning and Landale 1996; Wildsmith and Raley 2006; Wilcox et al. 2013; Wolfinger et al. 2010). As such, religiously active Hispanic cohabiters are unlikely to feel guilty or distressed about violating religious teachings on nonmarital sex and childbearing, which

may help to improve relationship quality (Pinhey and Perez 2000). This context combined with the cultural focus on familism may provide an environment that helps to not only tolerate but also support Hispanic cohabiters who are religious. The emphasis on familism may encourage Hispanic parents to place a high level of priority on their family life, and the collective orientation of networks within religious organizations may be especially helpful in providing resources and support to cohabiting couples, and cohabiting parents in particular (Baca Zinn and Pok 2002; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007; 2008). By attending religious services together, Hispanic cohabiters may gain access to these benefits, which may encourage them to work towards maintaining their relationship and staying together to raise children. Thus, although cohabiting relationships are generally more likely to dissolve than marriages (Bumpass and Lu 2000), the message of familism that is reinforced by religious communities may serve as a stabilizing force for Hispanic cohabiters. Indeed, results from this study suggest that Hispanic religiously homogamous cohabiters are no more likely to dissolve their relationship than married Hispanics.

Although there are a number of strengths in this study, there are also some limitations to note. First, the FFCW focuses on parents, who are more likely to be in stable relationships than non-parents (Wu 1995). The FFCW also includes a disproportionate number of low-income families and minorities. Thus, the results of this study are not generalizable to all families.

Another limitation is that questions about religious affiliation were not asked in each wave. A variable was included to account for changes in religious affiliation between W1 and W3, but future studies should continue to examine how religious converters may differ from couples that are consistently heterogamous or homogamous. Furthermore, only a dichotomous measure of denominational homogamy was used in this study. Although supplemental analyses

support the use of a dichotomous measure, future research should further examine whether relationship stability varies by the denominational composition of the union.

Finally, it is possible that the relationship between religious homogamy and relationship stability is due to first-order religious differences in the likelihood of relationship dissolution. The strategy described by Fu and Wolfinger (2011) to avoid this problem was used in supplementary analyses, and the substantive conclusions regarding the relationship between attendance homogamy and relationship stability among cohabiters persisted in these models. However, small cell sizes prevented the use of this model to assess relationship stability among married couples, and these models were unable to assess the influence of denominational homogamy on relationship stability given the measures used in this study.

Despite these limitations, this study helps to further our understanding of increasing family diversity by examining whether religion contributes to relationship stability. Specifically, this study explores whether religion provides benefits to family contexts characterized by high levels of instability: cohabiting families and racial/ethnic minority families. Overall, two key findings emerged. First, results showed that denominational homogamy was associated with a lower risk of dissolution among cohabiters, suggesting that shared religious beliefs may help to stabilize cohabiting relationships. Second, results showed that attendance homogamy was especially beneficial to Hispanic cohabiters; Hispanic cohabiters who attended services frequently were less likely to end their relationship than all other cohabiting couples (regardless of race/ethnicity or religious attendance), and no more likely to dissolve their relationship than Hispanic marriages. These findings help to shed light on the influence that religious institutions may have in urban areas and the ways in which they may provide support to diverse families.



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Table 1  
*Summary Statistics (N = 2,019)*

Variable	Married		Cohabiting	
	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>S.D.</i>
<u>Religious Composition</u>				
Denominational homogamy	.70	-	.54*	-
Denominational heterogamy <sup>a</sup>	.30	-	.46*	-
Transition to denominational homogamy	.06	-	.06	-
Both frequent attenders	.40	-	.16*	-
Both infrequent attenders	.37	-	.59*	-
Attendance heterogamy <sup>a</sup>	.24	-	.25	-
<u>Controls</u>				
Relationship duration	4.53	3.42	2.02*	2.30
Mother's age	29.35	5.64	24.09*	5.46
Father's age	31.75	6.45	26.77*	6.78
Black	.26	-	.49*	-
Hispanic	.25	-	.35*	-
White <sup>a</sup>	.48	-	.16*	-
Mother is native born	.80	-	.84*	-
Father is native born	.77	-	.81*	-
Mother's parents married at 15	.65	-	.39*	-
Father's parents married at 15	.68	-	.43*	-
Number of additional kids	1.11	-	1.20	-
Previously married	.13	-	.19*	-
Both parents did not graduate high school <sup>a</sup>	.10	-	.25*	-
Both parents completed high school	.09	-	.15*	-
Both parents attended college	.13	-	.08*	-
Both parents obtained a college degree	.24	-	.00*	-
Difference in education between parents	.44	-	.52*	-
Household income	6.69	2.05	4.30*	2.11
Family received welfare	.11	-	.43*	-
<i>N</i>	814		1205	

*Note:* Baseline values are presented for all variables. All estimates are unweighted.

\*Indicates that cohabiters are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from married individuals.

<sup>a</sup>Used as the reference category.

Table 2

*Cumulative Percentage of Unions Ending in Separation by Union Status at Child's Birth and Religious Composition of Union*

	Denomination			Attendance		
	Total	Homogamy	Heterogamy	Both Frequent	Both Infrequent	Heterogamy
	<i>N</i> = 2,019	<i>n</i> = 1,220	<i>n</i> = 799	<i>n</i> = 511	<i>n</i> = 1,011	<i>n</i> = 497
Married at birth ( <i>n</i> = 814)	12%	12%	12%	12%	12%	15%
Cohabiting at birth ( <i>n</i> = 1,205)	36%	33%	41% <sup>a</sup>	33%	38%	39%
Total ( <i>N</i> = 2,019)	26%	23%	31% <sup>a</sup>	19%	30% <sup>b</sup>	29% <sup>b</sup>

*Note:* *N* = 2,019. Two-tailed t-tests used to determine differences between groups. <sup>a</sup>Indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) from denominationally homogamous unions. <sup>b</sup>Indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) from unions in which both partners frequently attend services.



Table 3

*Results from Cox Models Predicting Hazard Ratios of Marital Dissolution by Year 5 after the Birth of a Child (N = 814)*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<u>Religious Composition</u>				
Denominational homogamy	1.07	1.45	1.53	1.47
Transition to denominational homogamy	.91	1.11	1.35	1.11
Both frequent attenders	.62	.69	.69	.81
Both infrequent attenders	.80	1.00	1.02	1.18
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>				
Black		2.27**	2.73*	2.97*
Hispanic		.69	.21	.53
<u>Interactions</u>				
Black x denominational homogamy			.78	
Black x both frequent attenders				.66
Black x both infrequent attenders				.69
Hispanic x denominational homogamy			3.97	
Hispanic x both frequent attenders				1.48
Hispanic x both infrequent attenders				1.28
<u>Controls</u>				
Relationship duration		.94	.94	.94
Mother's age		.95	.95	.95
Father's age		.98	.98	.98
Mother is native born		2.40*	2.61*	2.36*
Father is native born		.58	.61	.59
Mother's parents married at 15		.63*	.65	.63*
Father's parents married at 15		.95	.97	.95
Number of additional kids		.88	.88	.89
Previously married		2.32*	2.32*	2.38*
Both parents completed high school		.97	.93	.93
Both parents attended college		.94	.95	.91
Both parents obtained a college degree		.59	.60	.57
Difference in education between parents		.89	.91	.84
Household income		.90	.90	.91
Family received welfare		1.74	1.88	1.71
<i>-2 log likelihood</i>	1124	1038	1035	1036

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 4  
*Results from Cox Models Predicting Hazard Ratios of the Dissolution of Cohabiting Relationships by Year 5 after the Birth of a Child (N = 1205)*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<u>Religious Composition</u>				
Denominational homogamy	.78*	.94	1.33	.92
Transition to denominational homogamy	.75	.83	.83	.82
Both frequent attenders	1.07	1.19	1.19	5.35**
Both infrequent attenders	1.36*	1.26	1.25	3.44**
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>				
Black		1.16	1.35	2.95*
Hispanic		.84	1.10	2.59
<u>Interactions</u>				
Black x denominational homogamy			.69	
Black x both frequent attenders				.23*
Black x both infrequent attenders				.25*
Hispanic x denominational homogamy			.57	
Hispanic x both frequent attenders				.13**
Hispanic x both infrequent attenders				.28*
<u>Controls</u>				
Relationship duration		1.06	1.06*	1.06*
Mother's age		.96**	.95**	.96**
Father's age		.99	.99	.99
Mother is native born		1.68	1.66	1.74
Father is native born		1.25	1.22	1.18
Mother's parents married at 15		.89	.89	.89
Father's parents married at 15		.92	.92	.94
Number of additional kids		.98	.98	.97
Previously married		1.30	1.31	1.31
Both parents completed high school		1.10	1.10	1.10
Both parents attended college		1.30	1.28	1.24
Both parents obtained a college degree		.98	.98	.92
Difference in education between parents		1.19	1.19	1.18
Household income		.98	.98	.98
Family received welfare		1.08	1.07	1.07
<i>-2 log likelihood</i>	4649	4593	4591	4582

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

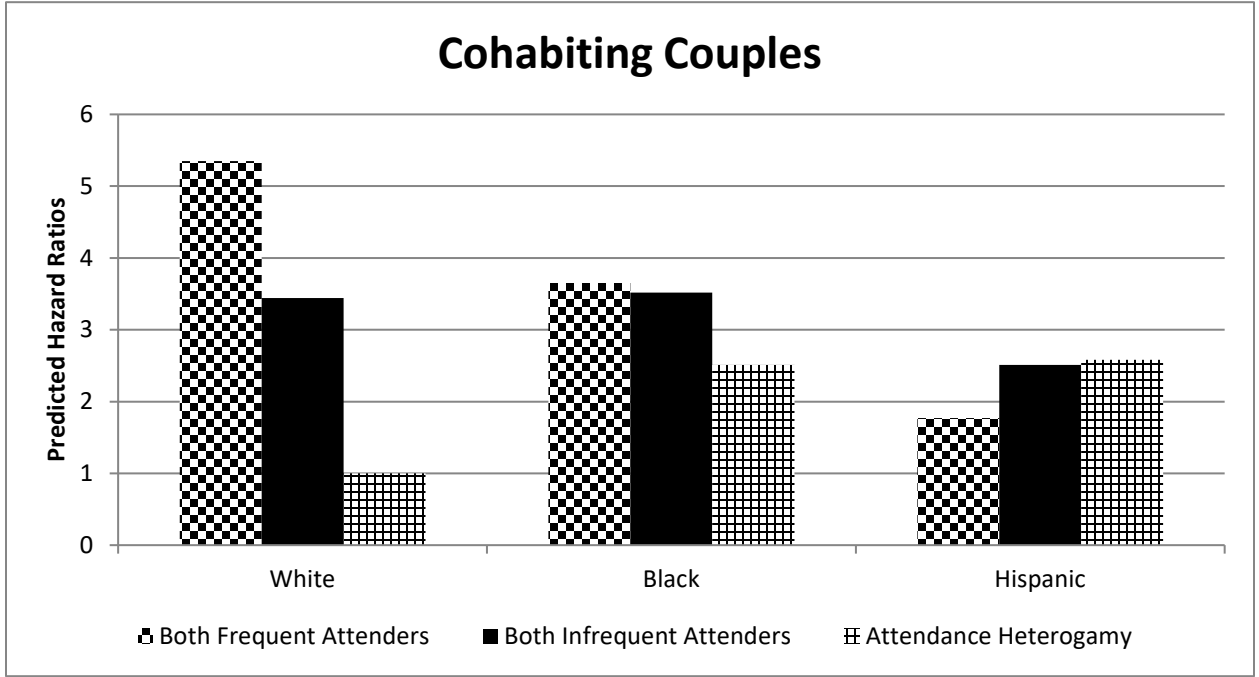
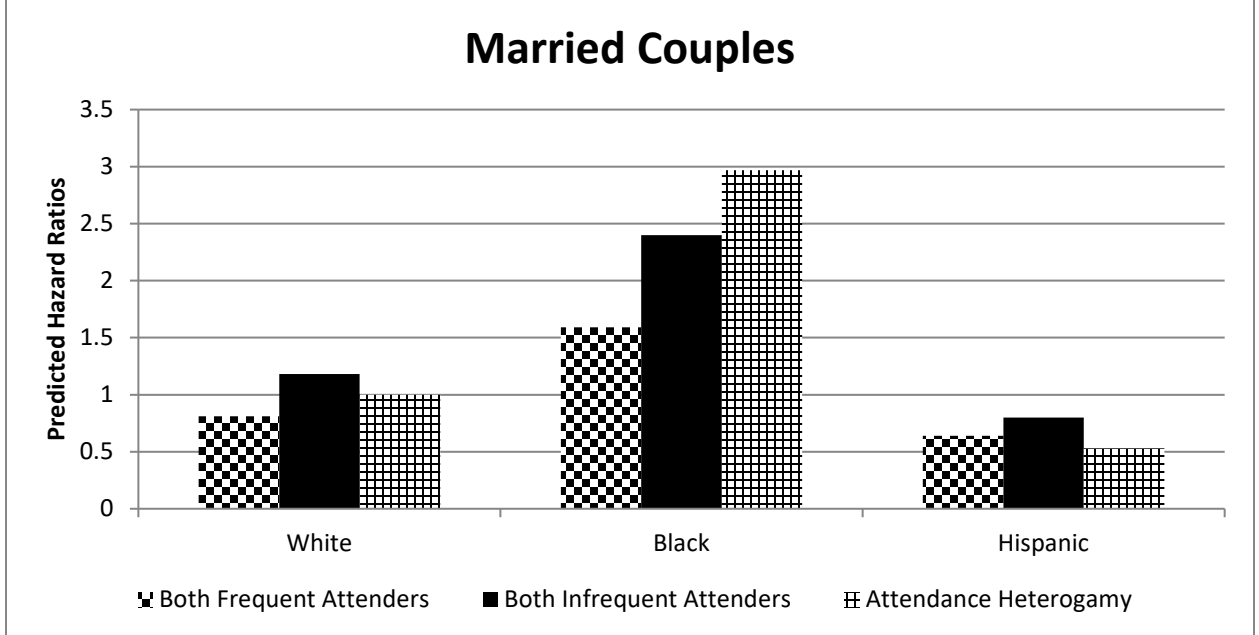
Table 5  
*Cumulative Percentage of Unions Ending in Separation by Union Status at Child's Birth, Race and Religious Composition of Union*

	Attendance		
	Both Frequent <i>n</i> = 511	Both Infrequent <i>n</i> = 1,011	Heterogamy <i>n</i> = 497
Both White, Married ( <i>n</i> = 392)	5%	9%	7%
Both White, Cohabiting ( <i>n</i> = 198)	48% <sup>b</sup>	42% <sup>b</sup>	27% <sup>b</sup>
Both Black, Married ( <i>n</i> = 215)	20%	22%	29%
Both Black, Cohabiting ( <i>n</i> = 588)	45% <sup>b</sup>	42% <sup>b</sup>	45% <sup>b</sup>
Both Hispanic, Married ( <i>n</i> = 207)	14%	10%	5%
Both Hispanic, Cohabiting ( <i>n</i> = 419)	15%	29% <sup>b</sup>	32% <sup>ab</sup>

*Note:* N = 2,019. Results based on life-table estimates. <sup>a</sup>Indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) from unions in which both partners frequently attend religious services.

<sup>b</sup>Indicates a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between married and cohabiting unions.

Figure 1  
*Predicted Hazard Ratios Depicting the Relationships between Attendance Homogamy, Race/Ethnicity, and Relationship Dissolution (N =2,019)*



Appendix  
*Cumulative Percentage of Unions Ending in Separation by Religious  
 Denomination*

	Married	Cohabiting	
<u>Homogamous Relationships</u>			
Both No Religious Affiliation	15%	33%	
Both Catholic	9%	22%	***
Both Conservative Protestant	18%	44%	***
Both Mainline Protestant	9%	38%	*
Both Other Religion	10%	31%	***
<u>Heterogamous Relationships</u>			
No Religious Affiliation – Catholic	62%	39%	*
No Religious Affiliation – Conservative Protestant	26%	48%	
No Religious Affiliation – Mainline Protestant	33%	50%	
No Religious Affiliation – Other Religion	6%	39%	*
Catholic – Conservative Protestant	14%	29%	
Catholic – Mainline Protestant	5%	14%	
Catholic – Other Religion	7%	37%	**
Conservative Protestant – Mainline Protestant	6%	69%	***
Conservative Protestant – Other Religion	13%	44%	***
Mainline Protestant – Other Religion	0%	52%	**
<i>N</i>	814	1205	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Note:* N = 2,019. Results based on life-table estimates. Two-tailed t-tests used to determine significant differences by union status.